BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DU LIVRE

Social software in libraries: Building collaboration, communication and community online. By Meredith G. Farkas. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, Inc., 2007. 344 pages (soft cover). ISBN 978-1-57387-275-1. US$39.50.

In the same way that social software gives a face to the Web, Meredith Farkas' book *Social software in libraries: Building collaboration, communication and community online* provides a concrete and practical identity to the nebulous topic of social software.

Granted the *Library Journal*'s Movers & Shakers 2006 Award, Farkas is highly qualified to discuss the topic of social software. She brings significant practical experience from the field as both author and creator of various social software resources, such as the Information Wants to Be Free Blog and Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki.

Designed to be a "nuts-and-bolts guide," Farkas' book provides novice users with basic information and easy-to-follow steps for implementing social software, while appealing to the experienced user with innovative ways to expand current applications of social software tools. Farkas insists librarians be vigilant in using social software, approaching it not as an end in itself, but as a means to building a meaningful online community with others, either within or outside the library environment.

After providing a workable definition of social software, Farkas dedicates each subsequent chapter to a particular social software tool, including mainstream applications such as blogs, wikis, RSS, social networks, and podcasts. Also included are the less widely acknowledged applications like online communities, social bookmarking, virtual reference, mobiles, gaming, and screencasting/vodcasting. Each chapter follows a similar pattern; Farkas clarifies what the technology is, describes its evolution over time, explains how it works, and how it might be used in diverse library settings. The book concludes with a discussion of future trends in social software and practical solutions for staying current on the latest developments in the field. Appended is a list of the tools and institutions discussed, with associated URLs. Further, the book is complemented by an accompanying Web site that ameliorates the dilemma caused by publication delay and the ever-changing nature of technology.

Farkas' initial discussion of the fundamental principles underpinning the concept of social software is useful in setting the stage for the remaining chapters. A solid understanding of these principles is essential to the librarian who hopes to successfully implement social software technologies. Farkas covers the necessary background, discussing portability, easy content creation and sharing, "bottom-up" community development, distributed and real-time conversation, transparency, online collaboration, personalization, and the wisdom of crowds.

The author explains the technical mechanics behind each social software application without weighing down the non-technical reader in IT technicalities. She further supports these explanations with illustrations derived from real-world situations that are often successful because they have little to do with computers.

Farkas facilitates the users' task of tool selection with a discussion of the options available for each social software technology. She classifies the tools in ways that will aid in the selection of the most appropriate one and considers variables such as cost, user-friendliness, customization, popularity, technical requirements, and ease of startup. Farkas stresses the importance of choosing the tool that will be most widely accepted by library users.

Drawing on her own personal experience and those of her library colleagues, Farkas presents a plethora of practical uses for each social software application. Her proposals for the use of social software applications range from very simple and straightforward ideas that can be executed immediately (such as an internal reference wiki) to increasingly innovative ideas that require careful planning to implement (such as the use of social bookmarking/wikis to allow patron comments in the library catalogue). The author's recommendations for using social software are diverse, including examples like catalogue/Web site maintenance and enhanced searchability, convenient current awareness and effective library marketing, and improved programming. Farkas' suggestions are specific yet sufficiently flexible to allow the reader a vision of how they might be applied to specific library environments. The inclusion of actual examples of institutions' success stories with social software applications gives further credence to the author's ideas. Similarly, Farkas supports her claims in each chapter by providing brief interviews with social software leaders.

Advice on tool selection, user needs assessment, financial implications, and the role the library can play in educating users about the benefits and disadvantages of social software are also included as part of the author's discussion on the implementation process. Farkas is not naïve to the security and privacy issues surrounding social software; she alerts her readers to these concerns and encourages them to investigate fully before adopting new applications.

While the book will be most useful to novice users, it has something to offer to those who are well versed in social software applications. The background on tools and suggestions for their use is applicable to all levels of library employees within all sectors of librarianship. Farkas has successfully captured the essence of social software, and her enthusiasm for the subject is contagious to the risk-taking and innovative librarian.

Shauna-Lee Konrad
J.C. Rathbun Library
Children's Hospital, London Health Sciences Centre
800 Commissioners Road East
London, ON N6A 5W9, Canada
E-mail: shauna.konrad@lhsc.on.ca